

AMBASSA

MALIHA ZULFACAR RETURNS FROM DIPLOMATIC POST

BY TERESA MARIANI HENDRIX



SOCIOLOGY PROFESSOR MALIHA ZULFACAR is back in the classroom at Cal Poly, fresh off a three-year stint as the ambassador to Germany for her native country, Afghanistan.

Zulfacar initially didn't tell her students about her time as "madame ambassador."

She started the quarter the usual way: asking her students to guess where she's from. Fluent in German, English and several Afghan dialects, her soft accent is apparently very hard to place.

"This year I got South America, Spain and Portugal," she said. It wasn't until she hinted that she's from "the most troubled country in the world" that they guessed Afghanistan. (The exercise aims to show that "race" is a non-scientific social construct, she said.)

Like every quarter since 2002, the students were shocked. And like every quarter since then, she's told them no, she's not a terrorist, not in the Taliban – and neither are most Afghans.

Instead, she said, Afghanistan is the victim of three decades of war that started with the Russian invasion in 1979. It's a subject with which she's quite familiar. She was a sociology professor at Kabul University when the Russians arrived in tanks. She and her family were among the first wave of refugees who fled to Germany. The exodus continued; Germany now has the largest concentration of Afghan refugees and "second generation" Afghan immigrants in Europe, she explained.

Zulfacar eventually left Germany with her two children, settled in the United States, went on to finish her master's and doctorate degrees, and joined the faculty at Cal Poly.

Before Sept. 11, 2001, the professor was working with educated Afghan women living abroad, trying to improve wom-

ADOR IN THE CLASSROOM

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en's rights and lives in their native country. After Sept. 11, she taught summers at Kabul University and worked for the nation's education ministry.

"The level of physical destruction there is extremely disturbing," she said. "What I am most concerned with is the cultural destruction – the destruction of the entire social fabric of Afghanistan."

She saw her appointment as an Afghan diplomat in 2006 as a new opportunity to contribute to the country's reconstruction.

The aim, she said, was to help show the German public that there is more to Afghanistan's heritage and history than the Taliban.

She also lobbied strongly for Germany to fund vocational education for unemployed youths in Afghanistan.

"You see thousands of young men on the street corners, without skills and job opportunities for the future," she said. "They need basic skills to participate in the rebuilding of their country. Education will be the way to make Afghanistan self-reliant and self-sufficient."

Realistically, she said, "That will take a generation."

More than 80 percent of that nation's population is illiterate, more than 88 percent of Afghan women are illiterate, life expectancy is 45, and more than 70 percent of the population still lives in rural, third-world conditions, she said.

But Zulfacar doesn't find those numbers entirely bleak.

"In 2001, only 3 percent of little girls attended school in Afghanistan. Today 38 percent attend school," she said. And women now make up 29 percent of Afghanistan's parliament. "Eight years ago, just for women to be a part of parliament would not be thinkable."

Some changes are more tangible to visitors, like the con-

struction of tall, modern buildings in Kabul. However, she said, living standards for rural villages or the urban poor remain largely unchanged.

Zulfacar is glad to have spent much of the past decade working to rebuild the country where she was born. But she is also glad to be back at Cal Poly after an extended sabbatical.

"I was really looking forward to my return to academia," she beamed on a recent afternoon as students streamed in and out of her office.

"The world has become so interwoven due to technology that it really is a global village. I try to teach that a good engineer or a good architect is not just about making good designs. It's about understanding who you are designing for, about understanding the people." □

MORE ABOUT PROFESSOR ZULFACAR

A Life Revisited: Professor Maliha Zulfacar Returns to Afghanistan

Cal Poly Magazine Article, Summer 2002

[www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_releases/2010/
January/Zulfacar-2002-Magazine.html](http://www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_releases/2010/January/Zulfacar-2002-Magazine.html)

Maliha Zulfacar: Teaching What She Lives

Cal Poly Magazine Article, Summer 2006

[www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_releases/2010/
January/Zulfacar-2006-Magazine.html](http://www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_releases/2010/January/Zulfacar-2006-Magazine.html)

Afghan Professor Releases Award-Winning Documentary on DVD

[http://www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_
releases/2008/March/Zulfacar_dvd.html](http://www.calpolynews.calpoly.edu/news_releases/2008/March/Zulfacar_dvd.html)